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THE FUNCTION OF BUSINESS BODIES  
IN IMPROVING CIVIC  
CONDITIONS

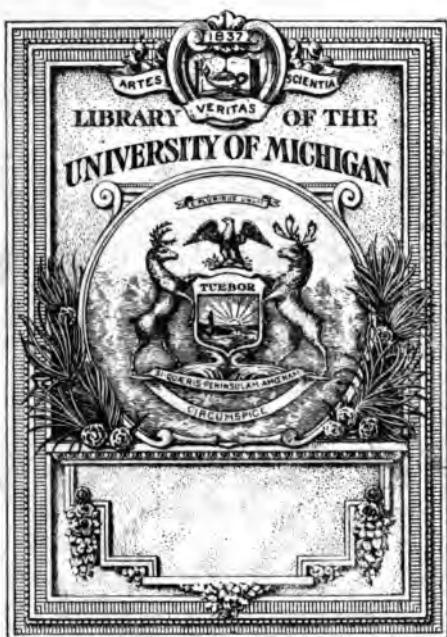
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H. D. W. ENGLISH, PITTSBURGH

Formerly President, Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce, and Chairman,  
Pittsburgh Civic Commission

REPRINTED FROM THE  
PROCEEDINGS OF THE PITTSBURGH MEETING

1908



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## The Function of Business Bodies in Improving Civic Conditions

H. D. W. ENGLISH, Pittsburgh

Formerly President, Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce, and Chairman  
Pittsburgh Civic Commission

Increasing numbers of people in America are coming to believe that chambers of commerce and business bodies generally have a very great obligation toward, and duty in connection with, civic problems.

With the exception of three or four in this country, commercial organizations, as a rule, are distinctly given over to what is called the promotion of the commercial welfare of the community in which they exist. They naturally turn to broadening markets; to better transportation facilities; currency and trade questions, and to advertising their several localities. These are regarded as the fundamentals of commercial prosperity. The three or four exceptions which have taken up civic work are in great centers and civic advancement has been quite pronounced already as a result.

Commercial organizations, however, have in the past neglected a large field which virtually effects the very fundamentals of a commercial supremacy, i.e., that a city to be great commercially must be great civically. How can any set of business men go out from a community and ask for business confidence; for contracts involving immense sums of money when that city's public business and civic tone is so low as to cause suspicion to fall on these same business men, who, through neglect of their civic duties, have given a just cause for suspicion of civic incompetency. It doesn't matter how unjust it may be to the individual. Allow the city to drift civically upon the rocks and the commercial prosperity will soon follow.



On the other hand, organization of effort as expressed in such associations as we are speaking of present the most effective way of obtaining knowledge and suggesting remedies in civic matters which may effect commercial advance in a conservative, dispassionate way without fear of the criticism of doing so for partisanship advantage. Indeed there should be no thought of partisanship.

Organizations of this kind will make themselves felt for civic good when it is found out that they are actuated by broad principles of public policy for the whole good of the city.

**The Influence of Business Men** The fact that influential, thoughtful and active business men have agreed upon a certain policy will carry weight in a community of thinking people, and with any thoughtful legislative body.

There should be no conflict between such organizations and municipal legislatures where both are seeking to solve questions for the highest good. They both should approach all municipal questions with the one desire of solving them properly and with mutual respect for the judgment of both. The most effective way, however, is through the appointment of a committee from the legislative body to hear a committee from business organizations and together thresh out the chaff and get the wheat. Each should recognize the need of the point of view of the other. The consideration of municipal problems by boards of business and technical men, apart from the municipal government and administration, is a good one, in that it causes our busy American people to think more of the government, of which we are a part, and more of their duties and not leave everything to those to whom we elect to office. The very fact that interest is aroused will cause those same people whom we have elected to be more thoughtful in their actions.

In Greater Pittsburgh we have fourteen commercial and civic bodies organized for the purpose of fostering trade and for civic betterment, composed of 3500 leading business men and women, all citizens. The great civic questions are taken up by some one of these organizations and by them discussed and the consensus of opinion arrived at and passed on to the others and by them in turn discussed and opinion arrived at. The final judgment

should be of inestimable value to any legislative body, and is a real contribution to the subject in hand and should have its weight in the final determination of any question by a municipal legislature seeking the highest good.

There is another feature which is not so apparent to all, namely, that municipal government generally plans for those municipal activities which either through custom or time

**Shortsight-  
edness** have been found necessary, or the doing of which can actually be seen to pay in some immediate results; sometimes, alas, pay in a political way and sometimes pay in a broad public way, but at any rate, not looking a long time into the future. It is proverbially the remark that municipalities, while they always wish to see returns for money expended, are not capable of looking very far into the future and seeing benefits from money expended today which will come back, perhaps, to our children. Such things as better housing conditions, better transportation facilities, better care of the children of the streets and better sanitary conditions, the granting of franchises viewed in a broad way, sometimes look too advanced to the ordinary legislator, but it is not difficult to show to the thoughtful business man that all this counts, even counts from the dollars-and-cents point of view, let alone the matter of civic pride. So it is by the arousing of interest in such bodies of business men that we have a healthy tone in a community which operates for the public good.

The consideration of great numbers of civic questions necessary to the economy of operation, reduction of water waste, etc., can be solved much more readily, much more intelligently, by a body of business men, and civic advancement and remedial measures will only be furthered by such bodies which in the very nature of their individual business take into consideration far-reaching effects and future needs, all of which business men are accustomed to review before taking action. Perhaps no body of men engaged in voluntary work can bring to bear in the solving of civic problems so much expert knowledge or engineering skill on subjects such as engineering, filtration, flood protection, sewage disposal, smoke abatement, civic and archi-



tectural beautification, housing conditions and the drafting of proper legislation relative thereto, or the same all-round touch necessary to a wise decision on these great questions which so vitally effect the welfare of a city, as the men who make up the membership in a commercial organization.

The membership of commercial bodies can be assumed to represent the most progressive and broadest men of the city, yet men of this kind in the rush and exactions of their business are too apt to forget the, to them, minor things which make for better municipal living. There is a tendency also to look upon new movements as being largely theoretical rather than practical. By committee work, such as is done in chambers of commerce who do civic work, the men get closer together and by conferences and talks with those who are in closer touch with the civic needs, such as the heads of the departments of a great city, are first brought to take an interest and finally to lend their active assistance, and the very fact that after due consideration such assistance is given to these civic subjects gives such subjects a better standing before the community. No administrative branch of the city government can accomplish much unless it has the coöperation and confidence of the business

men of the city, men who are responsible for the substantial growth and progress of the city.

**Coöperation by Doing Things** In no way can we get a better coöperation than by giving these men a chance to do something tangible themselves than by the creation of special committees to carry on special civic work.

It is scarcely necessary in this enlightened period to say, as has been said, that bad water, bad sewage, bad housing and bad air are a species of indirect taxation upon the business interests, not only as taxpayers, but in their effect upon the output. Let us be more explicit and make an illustration from our own experience in this city with typhoid fever in 1906-1907, caused by lack of pure water, and again caused by lack of attention on the part of our city authorities, until commercial and civic organizations, recognizing the frightful economic loss and loss of prestige to our city, forced attention to this matter. Let us put it all on the low ground of values lost in money and to com-

merce. In 1906 we had 5729 cases of typhoid fever. Of that number 508 died. It has been estimated that the average income of each of the 508 people was \$300.00 annually. That annual earning capacity represents a capitalization of \$5000 at 6 per cent. If we multiply that capitalization by 508 then this city lost in income \$152,400 annually, or what could correspond to an earning capacity on \$2,540,000 in capitalization in a single year. This loss is simply for one year. If the average age of the 508 was arrived at and the expectation of these lives which were sacrificed in a great measure because of lack of civic duty, were gone into, the economic loss to this city in a number of years as a result of civic neglect would be appalling. Then again we add to this the frightful loss from the "White Plague," (estimated recently by one of our leading specialists at \$4,000,000 annually in this city) and we can easily be said to have been losing

**Pittsburgh's** alone, of over \$300,000 annually. That represents a steel works capitalized at \$3,000,000  
**Typhoid Fever** earning 10 per cent on its capitalization. Were  
**Campaign** the citizens of this great city to wake up to the

fact that we are actually losing annually a tangible steel mill costing \$3,000,000, paying \$300,000, how long would our commercial organizations question the advisability of entering heartily into civic questions which involve such vast sums of money? In making this illustration from our own city let us call the attention of almost every American city to like conditions. It is not to point the finger of scorn at any city that these figures are given, but to call the attention of all to this frightful economic loss that can be stayed by intelligent work. One feels like apologizing for placing human life on so low a plane as to show its commercial value to a city, but if it illumines the minds of the members of our great American commercial organizations to the absolute need of a keener sense of a civic responsibility on their part today, then the use of the illustration may be forgiven. Nor is that all. In a great many American cities illustrated lectures on the question of pure water are being given. Wandering into one of these lectures several years ago, imagine my chagrin at finding my own city placed as one of the



